

Rerum Novarum

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***Rerum Novarum*: Theological reasoning for the public sphere?**

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Abstract

Contemporary Catholic Social Teaching has increasingly come to bear on the moral and political horizons of our interdependent lives, seeking to address the nature and purpose of our common striving for human flourishing. Frequently, *Rerum Novarum* is identified as an origin point for CST as a distinctive thread within the deeper tradition of Catholic theology attentive to justice, and the common good. The focus on justice in labour practices, especially living wages and social participation, demonstrates its contemporary relevance, but can it contribute to the public debate on such issues, beyond the framework of its particular convictions? This article suggests *Rerum Novarum* offers theological reasoning in and for the public sphere by way of its insistence on: the social bond as foundation and task; the role of political and cultural plurality in formation and action; a rich vision of public life as morally participatory for all.

Keywords: Catholic Social Teaching, Pluralism, Public Sphere, Public Theology

Introduction

In a labour landscape that is currently shaped by an intensifying of exploitative and dehumanising patterns of work, *Rerum Novarum* (RN) is startlingly relevant. Although manifesting in technologically shaped ways that Leo XIII never envisioned in 1891, contemporary concerns about zero hour contracts and wage control, modern slavery, exploitation and exclusion of migrants, living wage, the role of unions, all find resonance in this text. RN similarly grapples with wage control, the focus on profit to the detriment of those who produced it, the consequent exclusion of workers from social participation¹, who are often those performing work needed for the general welfare.

At the same time there are reasons not to look to RN if one is considering the role of theological reasoning as a public task. While the concept of the public sphere itself is a contested one, public reasoning is reasoning that can be shared, even with those from different traditions. RN, by contrast, was written in response to industrial patterns of the late nineteenth century, and consequently is largely concerned only with those in Western Europe and North America, and is

¹ This has been a key criticism of the implications of various austerity measures over the last decade: that financial hardship creates social and political exclusion. Assemblée Parlement, *Resolution 1884: Austerity Measures - A Danger for Democracy and Social Rights* (Brussels: Council of Europe, 26/06/2012)

strictly only addressed to male, Catholic Church leaders. It is a narrowly directed text. Indeed, that last restriction to the ‘the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other ordinaries’ may be seen as emblematic of this. While it may consider a wider social question, *RN* is ultimately most interested in its impact on the faithful, the Church and Catholic agencies and their roles. In this sense then *RN* is not a public document even in the way that later encyclicals would address themselves to all people of good will².

Nevertheless, this text represents a crucial link in the chain of thought that would eventually be expressed under the title of Catholic Social Teaching. Indeed, it is to *RN* that Max Stackhouse pointed, as so many do, as an origin point in the ‘the widening scope of Catholic teachings’, which he saw as a key strand in the resourcing of a ‘Catholic accent’ to public theology through the 1980s and 90s³. That tradition of CST fractures open some of the rigidly institutional character of such texts, in its emphasis on the agency of all people implicated in social and political questions. As Elizabeth Phillips has suggested, this may be the important contribution of theological perspectives in their attention to the meaning of shared life not only as an ethical tool to address particular difficulties.⁴ In this way, *RN* may prove fruitful for considering how distinctively confessional texts may offer publically significant re-imaginings of shared moral life.

Just Labour Practices as a Public Concern

RN offers a sense of labour as a fundamentally good feature of human lives. It is presented as a way in which the person makes a contribution to the world by their very selves. There is much that could be said in response to this position in its own right, but here it serves as a valuable contrast to the concrete way workers experienced labour in this period. The situation in the latter half of the nineteenth century was of ubiquitous injustice, especially directed toward the working and out of work poor: ‘Such men feel in most cases that they have been fooled by empty promises and deceived by false pretexts. They cannot but perceive that their grasping employers too often treat them with great inhumanity and hardly care for them outside the

² Not all encyclicals are addressed beyond, at most, the lay faithful. Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) and Francis’s *Laudato Si’* (2015) are examples of recent texts that are addressed to society beyond the bounds of the Church, concerned as they are with questions of integral human development as such.

³ M. L. Stackhouse, ‘Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?’, *Political Theology*, 5:3 (2004), pp. 275-293. p.287.

⁴ E. Phillips, ‘Politics and Political Theology’ in T. Winwright (ed.) *T&T Clark Companion to Christian Ethics* (forthcoming).

profit their labor brings'⁵. That inhumanity manifests in wages that cannot be lived on, the fracturing of relationships that could be collaborative, and working conditions that are dangerous and 'grind men down with excessive labor [so] as to stupefy their minds and wear out their bodies'⁶. The response of *RN* to all this is the declaration that 'to exercise pressure upon the indigent and the destitute for the sake of gain, and to gather one's profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human and divine.'⁷

It is the injustice of these practices that has drawn out this encyclical. *RN* was conceived in disquiet at rising socialist movements and indeed spends much of the early part of the text arguing against communal ownership as doing violence to individual freedom and to social relationships. Nevertheless this is not an encyclical purely about the ills of socialism. Rather, it treats the questions of labour and capital as questions of justice, calling for the legitimacy of state intervention⁸, redistribution⁹, and associations of all kinds, including Church and broader civic involvement¹⁰.

What this does is frame the just labour practices not as a market or strictly state concern but of broader, public meaning, and consequently demanding a Catholic response in action and in articulating just principles of labour. In this way *RN* seeks to articulate a vision of a good life, in confessional terms, that nevertheless is brought to bear at the level of the moral norm. To use Paul Ricoeur's distinctions, *RN* offers a way of discussing how to live but in doing so is 'pointing to the rootedness of norms in life and desire'¹¹. Rather than leaving such questions to the technical arena of markets, or statecraft, *RN* insists on situating them within a theological ethical understanding of the human person and her purpose, expressed morally in terms of the principles of justice, and corresponding practices that shape the concrete expression of that vision of the good life. Crucially, that vision is grounded in a theologically political understanding of the human person as mutually social, which is not intended as an idealised description, but as a task to be undertaken – indicative and imperative.¹²

⁵ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum. On the Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour* (Vatican, 1891), §61. *RN* will continue to use an English translation that suggests workers are male.

⁶ Leo XIII, *RN*, §42.

⁷ Leo XIII, *RN*, §20.

⁸ Leo XIII, *RN*, §16.

⁹ Leo XIII, *RN*, §33.

¹⁰ Leo XIII, *RN*, §48-51.

¹¹ P. Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*, tr. D. Pellauer (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2007), p. 46.

¹² E. Regan, *Theology and the Boundary Discourse of Human Rights*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), p. 69, where she discusses *imago Dei* in these terms.

In this understanding, as this paper will explore, the pursuit of living well must necessarily include others. As we shall see, this begins to open the possibility, often only nascent in this text, of the value of political and cultural plurality and the rich and complex vision of public civic life on which it relies. Each of these features begin to indicate the nature of the 'public' that is in play for *RN* and in ways that may step beyond its potentially narrowed focus.

The Social Bond as Public

Still, the tension of *RN* proposed as a contribution for public reasoning is not present purely because it is a religious text, but in its potentially authoritarian expression of its presumptions about political power: 'for the power to rule comes from God, and is, as it were, a participation in His, the highest of all sovereignties'¹³. This appears more starkly in the earlier *Immortale Dei*, pining for the fruits of Christendom: 'There was once a time when States were governed by the philosophy of the Gospel. Then it was that the power and divine virtue of Christian wisdom had diffused itself throughout the laws, institutions, and morals of the people, permeating all ranks and relations of civil society.'¹⁴ Most alarmingly, that Christian wisdom included conversion by the sword, and especially targets Muslims. Not only is this reading of Christendom a violent one, it is also an envisioning of the state itself, not only statecraft, as necessarily Christian, and crucially, leaving no room for the legitimacy of state authority, its role and limits as already public questions.

Certainly then this founding of the purpose and shape of political power is not 'public' in that Habermasian sense of a particular tradition translated into reasons that can be made sense of by those of other convictions. As noted, that is not its intent. In what sense then can a text like *RN* have anything to contribute to the public sphere especially in the light of its demonstrably exclusionary aspects?

Armando Salvatore's consideration of the public sphere has suggested that the project of Habermasian translation may only be part of a more complex landscape of the public sphere. Salvatore argues that Habermas's approach:

is a model based on a particular crystallization of the dialectics between inwardness and publicness... The modern liberal dialectics of inwardness and publicness

¹³ Leo XIII, *RN*, §35.

¹⁴ Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei. On the Christian Constitution of States* (Vatican, 1885), §21.

subverts and sometimes suppresses some fundamental characteristics of more ancient and often more complex trajectories of construction of public argument.¹⁵

Rather than limiting the understanding of the public sphere to a discourse of inward convictions translated, Salvatore's exploration draws on Greek, Catholic and Islamic contributions with the goal of complexifying what we understand to be public about the public sphere. He offers this as supplementary rather than providing a separate alternative to Habermas. As we will discover *RN* sits within a tradition that offers contributions to that exploration of publicness. There are two inter-linked dimensions that are worth drawing on here to place *RN* in relation to public deliberation: the social bond, and practical reasoning or *phronesis*.

Taking these two dimensions as mutually forming, Salvatore suggests that recognising the encounter with the other as the basic public experience supplements the otherwise 'inward' emphasis in forming the moral subject. 'The ethic of coping with otherness by entering into exchange and communication with the other is the key conceptual and practical stone for creating a sense of publicness'¹⁶. The translation of inward conviction is merely one functional way of responding to this; more fundamental is the relationship between persons that constitutes the social bond. While Salvatore deploys the language of *ego* and *alter* to discuss the constitutive character of that relationship, it is evident that this arises from the sociologically driven intent to provide a basic unit for making sense of the social bond. The *ego* that is in play is by no means the 'pointlike ahistorical identity of the "I"'¹⁷ as Paul Ricoeur would warn us of, but a figure always understood in relation to the *alter* – to the other.

This is further strengthened by the role Salvatore suggests *phronesis* may play in contributing to a sense of the public as a deliberative arena. *Phronesis* is introduced as mode of self-reflective reasoning that Salvatore sees as manifesting in diverse ways across traditions, including faith-based traditions. In its broadest sense,

Phronesis denotes a capacity of the agent that is partly discerning, partly communicative, and partly reflective of the consequences of action; it is therefore intrinsically interactive and deliberative, and potentially public. It indicates the

¹⁵ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere. Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 8.

¹⁶ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p. 11.

¹⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, tr. K. Blamey (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1994), p. 7.

agent's activity of finding means to ends, along with discerning the ends that a tradition defines and subjects to interpretation, more than dictating.¹⁸

This discerning agent is always in relation to the other. Salvatore points toward faith and other traditions that deploy practical reasoning as a tool to 'communicate and adjudicate over *ego's* and *alter's* needs'¹⁹, in the light of that relationality, thus introducing the concept of 'connective justice and equity'²⁰. The social bond then goes beyond the interpersonal to the public, which is cast as an arena of ethical consideration, to which political arrangements relate.

Here we can begin to see the possibility of a meeting point between Salvatore's dimensions of publicness, and the tradition on which *RN* draws. What Salvatore offers is an understanding of publicness that is necessarily to do with others and otherness. *RN* is developed in a trajectory from Thomas Aquinas's understanding of politics, similarly shaped by what he understood to be the sociality of human nature.

As so much of the papal writing of Leo XIII, *RN* is a Thomist project. This situates it within a particular understanding of the nature of the human person, grounded in the classic Aristotelian suggestion that 'man is a social and political animal'. Taken as a theological sentiment about human nature this recognises political arrangements as fundamentally natural to human activity, as the organising of our sociality. Aquinas suggests that there are concrete reasons for this, as 'one man, however, is not able to equip himself with all these things [he needs], for one man cannot live a self-sufficient life. It is therefore natural for man to live in fellowship with others'²¹. At the same time, this is not a neutral task to do with the exchange of resources, but purposive. The political economy reflects and supports our pursuit of our final end – it is 'the plan of things for human happiness'²², undertaken as a shared endeavour. The character of our created nature is found in our social relationships with each other and with God.

To be clear, Salvatore's conception of the public sphere is not as itself a Thomist project, but rather reflects plural traditions that have considered the task of living well as a fundamentally social endeavour. While those traditions, including the Thomistic trajectory of CST, take up the meaning of the social bond in particular visions of the good life, and in doing so continue to

¹⁸ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p. 11

¹⁹ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p.30.

²⁰ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p. 30.

²¹ T. Aquinas, 'De regimine principum', R. W. Dyson (ed.) *Thomas Aquinas. Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 6.

²² T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Vol.28, Law and political theory*, tr. T. Gilby (London: Blackfriars, 1966), IaIIae 90.2c.

provide a critical contribution to understanding the public not merely as the coincidence of preference but a meaningful social task. For example, as many contemporary political theological commentators have suggested, some traditions of political theory collapse that task into mere negotiation between individuals. Hobbesian models reject the very possibility of a common good, as Hobbes's assessment of humanity rests on the presumption that individual interests necessarily conflict, and thus that the truly uniting feature of humanity is fear of consequent violence. This leaves political activity as purely procedural, policing violent nature and managing conflicting interests. Such natural conflict is explicitly rejected in *RN*, which suggests that 'the great mistake made in regard to the matter now under consideration is to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict'²³.

To be sure, the reality of human sinfulness introduces questions of restraint for Aquinas, and concrete situations of injustice require responses as *RN* also insists. At a more fundamental level though the expectations this reveals for the task of political organisation are also prelapsarian. While politics may need to grapple in concrete ways with the consequences of humanity's tendency toward sin, that is not its original purpose. Instead, political arrangements may play a role in nourishing humanity's purpose toward mutual flourishing and are in this way responsive to a sociality that indicates the possibility of a common good – a good that reflects, informs and nourishes each individual's good as mutually implicating. David Hollenbach continues to frame this in terms of that natural sociality that is Aquinas's bedrock: 'the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being'²⁴. Indeed, for Aquinas, that is the very purpose of laws: 'the chief and main concern of law properly so called is the plan for the common good. The planning is the business of the whole people or of their vicegerent'²⁵. Even devolved by way of particular political arrangements, this framework commits all people to the common good, not only to a collection of individual goods.

Turning back to *RN*, while on one hand there remains a conservative emphasis on divisions by social class as natural features of a society, on the other it situates that within

²³ Leo XIII, *RN*, §19.

²⁴ D. Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 82.

²⁵ T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae 90.3c.

another and deeper consideration which must not be lost sight of. As regards the State, the interests of all, whether high or low, are equal. The members of the working classes are citizens by nature and by the same right as the rich; they are real parts, living the life which makes up, through the family, the body of the commonwealth...²⁶

Here the text brings to the explicitly political level the intuition of the social bond. It moves from the interpersonal relationships of family, friendship, chosen societies, expressed entirely religiously as 'bonds of friendship, but also in those of brotherly love. For they will understand and feel that all men are children of the same common Father'²⁷, to bring this ethical intuition to bear in a corresponding principle that connects and mediates those others as yet unmet in a broader sense of the public: 'that law of justice will be violated which ordains that each man shall have his due'²⁸. Further, this is not left solely at the level of the State, as an identified political task, but understood too as part of that broader public endeavour where 'all citizens, without exception, can and ought to contribute to that common good in which individuals share so advantageously to themselves'²⁹.

Salvatore's consideration of more complex genealogies of the public sphere has emphasised the fundamental character of the social bond as a mutual implication of a moral relationship, where the social bond inaugurates public questions of justice. This clarifies three key elements of the public significance of *RN*: the assumption of violent nature is antithetical to *RN*, and to CST more widely; political practice can thus be more than a merely procedural reaction to conflict but in fact is situated in an ethic of solicitude for the vulnerable and the commonweal; and ultimately the other and the plurality which so frightens Hobbes can be seen in the Aquinas tradition as itself part of our striving together to be human.

Plurality and Critique

The emphasis that Salvatore has offered on otherness as the fundamental category of the public has helped to identify an ethic of sociality of *RN* requiring articulation in moral demands on each other. I return at this point to the contribution of *phronesis* to that same sedimentation of

²⁶ Leo XIII, *RN*, §33.

²⁷ Leo XIII, *RN*, §25.

²⁸ Leo XIII, *RN*, §33.

²⁹ Leo XIII, *RN*, §34.

the meaning of public, which Salvatore maps. This category introduced deliberation, which included the other by way of ethics in practice.

One of the distinctive features of *RN*, and of CST as a wider tradition is that while exhorting people to action it draws back from offering concrete recommendations. As a tradition of thinking it is alive to the risks of such specific proposals. For example, though it will critique political approaches, the text is cautious about advocating for any one form of government intervention, or any kind of party politics as we would currently recognise it. *RN* is explicit in its condemnation of socialism, but so too of capitalism that speculated on the wages and therefore the wellbeing of individuals. Subsequent CST writings try to tread a similar line without committing to right or left ideologies, leaving scope for important disagreement on questions of practical reasoning. A crucial reason for this, addressed above, is the protection of the individual's agency and freedom to be involved in the transformation of his or her own circumstances. This practical deliberative level then is still to be worked out by the readers – it is offered as an opportunity for plural responses to a moral summons, that need working out not just by private individuals or state entities but in wider civic life.

So on one level, *RN* is deliberately plural. At the same time, the question of practical wisdom is not separate from the theological ethical vision of living well. Indeed, as Ricoeur has suggested, practices are in a sense downstream from the fundamental ethics which 'become concrete maxims for action only when taken up, reworked and rearticulated'³⁰ for particular areas of practice. The question of plurality then becomes not only about practices but about the specific ethical content that *RN* has offered as a way of making sense of our public responsibilities to each other. While *RN* represents a distinctive perspective that is in some respects closed, it also presents the outcome of a discursive tradition that has already involved the other and other traditions. It is worth interrogating whether this involves a recognition of the value that may be found in plurality, beyond care for the other, to include respect for plural traditions of moral reasoning that form part of a discursive public space.

Again, the roots of *RN*'s trajectory offer important work on this point. For Hobbes, plurality is inevitably a threat. For Aquinas, while happiness might have a single final end in God, human pursuit of it is necessarily plural, as he notes, 'men can proceed toward that end in different ways, as the very diversity of human efforts and activities shows'³¹. Salvatore himself turns to Aquinas as a key contributor to the sedimentation of the concept of publicness, not least as an

³⁰ P. Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*, p. 53

³¹ T. Aquinas, 'De regimine principum', p.5.

example of a thinker who sought to go beyond 'mere self-celebration of Latin Christendom's imperialistic ambitions'³². This included debate with the intellectual traditions of Islam, where literal violence was rejected for 'theoretically comparable discursive and conceptual weapons'³³.

Salvatore goes further, drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre to suggest that 'Aquinas sees partnership in faith as a practice that incorporates an ongoing work of definition of the goods and their hierarchy... the *telos*, within a discursive tradition, is never given a priori'³⁴. While *RN* is not contributing through a Habermasian translation to a public conversation, it does still represent an instance of ongoing discernment in a Thomistic mode. Salvatore suggests 'In Thomas's approach, the apprehension of the ultimate good is not enough. The notion of *telos* needed to be profoundly reconstructed, in order not to become circular'³⁵. That reconstruction is a process of ongoing inquiry, understood as a shared task where 'the individual paths to the supreme good can only be part of a collective endeavour that becomes manifest as public reason'³⁶.

Ernest Fortin has even made the case that in this respect *RN* has introduced a distinctively modern idea to Catholic theological tradition, in the category of the natural right to property, which he traces ultimately to John Locke. Fortin contrasts the language of the encyclical on the natural right to own property as 'sacred', a distinctly Lockean term, with the more moderate approach found in Aquinas, which he suggests is that 'Simply put, private property is a good idea. Although not an absolute demand of natural right, it is entirely in accord with it and ought to be favored whenever possible'³⁷. Fortin is correct that the encyclical emphasises private property more firmly than does the *Summa*, using the language of private property's 'sacred' significance: 'assuming as a principle that private ownership must be held sacred and inviolable. The law, therefore, should favor ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners.'³⁸ This principle is a response to the injustice of unfair – unliveable – wages. In this way *RN* frames the value of ownership in terms of the protection of the individual's pursuit of her or his good. It protects the 'liberty to dispose of his wages'³⁹, both

³² A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p.115.

³³ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p.115. See *Summa Contra Gentiles* I 2.3, where reason is a shared horizon for Christians and Muslims, which begins to go beyond the jingoistic treatment of Muslims in the much more recent *Immortale Dei*.

³⁴ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p.118, drawing on A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*, (London: Duckworth, 1988), pp. 179-80.

³⁵ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p.120.

³⁶ A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, p.120.

³⁷ E. L. Fortin AA, "'Sacred and Inviolable": *RN* and Natural Rights', *Theological Studies* 53.2 (1991), pp. 203-33. p.209, reconstructing T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae, 66.2

³⁸ Leo XIII, *RN*, §46.

³⁹ Leo XIII, *RN*, §5.

in terms of 'present welfare' and for 'advantage in time yet to come'⁴⁰. It is bringing the vision of living well at the ethical level to a principle of moral expectation that serves that vision.

Fortin's concern however, is the implication that the 'virtual absolutization of the right of private property'⁴¹ bears for divorcing individual interests from the wider community. Specifically, 'The modern rights doctrine in its original and still most powerful form amounts to nothing less than a proclamation of the sovereignty of the monadic individual.'⁴² He even compares the emphasis on rights over duties in *RN* to the Hobbesian emphasis on self-preservation, resulting in a 'diluted version of the common good, which will soon be conceived as nothing more than the sum of the conditions required to insure the free exercise of one's individual rights.'⁴³

In my view this is answered in the continuing contextualising of the individual's good as a constitutive element of the common good. It is because the well-being of the community is in what is mutual that the particular freedom of the individual demands respect. Conversely, the individual is not a self-oriented monad of interests, but 'they are real parts, living the life which makes up, through the family, the body of the commonwealth'⁴⁴. We see this interplay of individual and common life drawn out more fully and distinctly in later CST examples through to the emphasis on the 'unrepeatable'⁴⁵ individual. It is precisely when those who set wages 'use human beings as mere instruments for money-making' that the encyclical objects, insisting on the individuals as actors within their communities, not monadic consumers and producers. Instead the individual is a genuine agent as in Paul VI's, now classic, phrase of people as 'artisans of their own destiny,'⁴⁶ which is named as the outcome of 'mutual cooperation' rather than relationships of force. It is by way of seeking the common good as members of the moral whole that this is possible, where the notion of the common good is not static, nor a set of goods to be divided. Rather, in a beautiful reworking of that Hobbesian war of all against all, it is 'the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.'⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Leo XIII, *RN*, §7.

⁴¹ E. L. Fortin AA, "Sacred and Inviolable", p.216.

⁴² E. L. Fortin AA, "Sacred and Inviolable", p.224. A critique now familiar from many political theological commentators.

⁴³ E. L. Fortin AA, "Sacred and Inviolable", p.225.

⁴⁴ Leo XIII, *RN*, §33.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (Vatican, 1979), §13.

⁴⁶ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (Vatican, 1967), §65.

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Vatican, 1987), §38.

Still, methodologically, it is interesting to see that even a thoroughly Thomistic text is beginning to deploy certain modern categories. It is true, as Fortin observes, that there is a rights-based emphasis in *RN*, which does need more fully working out in relation to the common good, as later CST examples addressed more directly. *RN* is shaped plurally, reflecting that continuing discernment that MacIntyre emphasised for discursive traditions. This begins a consideration of rights that shapes later Catholic engagement with human rights as the ‘implications of the deepest reaches of the Christian tradition’⁴⁸.

It is perhaps not a surprise that *RN* deploys this particular tool as it explores the proper response by State and civic society to injustices. As Onora O’Neill has observed, ‘Justice has acquired new importance in modern societies because its *scope* and *tasks* expanded’⁴⁹ as it was needed as the critical criterion for judging the use of state, social, economic power as these spheres became more differentiated. ‘As the scope and tasks of justice widened, it still required principles of universal form’⁵⁰. O’Neill further argues that this need not lead to the opposition of universal principles with particular communitarian ways of reasoning, or ‘atomistic’ vs ‘embedded’ accounts of the human person⁵¹. What is crucial about CST as a public contribution, and the specific example of *RN*, is that these accounts of natural rights are made sense of not only in relation to the State, but to other social institutions and practices, to which I now turn.

Participatory Society

I noted above that the nature of the human person that grounds *RN* specifically and Catholic political theological thinking more broadly frames social life as a shared and mutual endeavor structured by principles of justice. *RN* names those principles in relation to State responsibilities, as specifically political task in the limited sense. Throughout the text however other institutions and practices of social life are a necessary part of the landscape. This goes beyond the family, which *RN* and later CST would continue to prioritise, to discuss other kinds of society within the political whole: craft guilds, mutual societies, workingmen’s groups, labour unions, confraternities, and of course the Church itself. These groups are introduced as the proper diversity of social engagement on questions of justice as the outworking of mutual

⁴⁸ M. L. Stackhouse, ‘Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology’, p. 282.

⁴⁹ O. O’Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue. A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 27.

⁵⁰ O. O’Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, p. 28.

⁵¹ O. O’Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, p. 23.

responsibility: 'All who are concerned in the matter should be of one mind and according to their ability act together'⁵², Church and state included.

The purpose of such groups is not only in relieving injustice, but also to further nourish social life itself. Speaking of organisations of employers and employees together, such groups both 'as afford opportune aid to those who are in distress, and... draw the two classes more closely together'⁵³. While such groups themselves may be formed by shared private interests, they are formed by 'this natural impulse which binds men together in civil society; and it is likewise this which leads them to join together in associations which are, it is true, lesser and not independent societies, but, nevertheless, real societies.'⁵⁴ Again, *RN* insists on recognising individuals as agents engaged in their own social transformation, collectively. As recently as *Laudato Si'*, CST has emphasised the role of 'a variety of intermediate groups'⁵⁵. *LS* has more distinctly linked the purposes of those groups, although having their own particular interests, to the wider pattern of the common good, indeed, they arise in a paragraph that commits 'society as a whole' to the common good. *RN* links the common and the group goods less clearly, noting that 'Civil society exists for the common good, and hence is concerned with the interests of all in general, albeit with individual interests also in their due place and degree'⁵⁶. The roles of institutions and practices outside the structures of the state are fundamentally contributive to shared wellbeing.

Taken together, this emphasis on intermediate social groups displays a valuing of particular cultural instantiations of seeking the good life, as well as public dialogue on establishing moral norms and standards for justice in the light of plural interests.⁵⁷ These diverse forms of civic practice take formative roles, especially in the light of *RN*'s expectation that such groups aim at 'helping each individual member to better his condition to the utmost in body, soul, and property', including thereby the 'duties of religion and morality'⁵⁸. More broadly, groups ultimately articulate and advocate in situations of injustice and thus contribute to public debate on moral norms and duties. What I suggest this does is break open the focus on state government to acknowledge the more complex influence of the multiple communities in which we live.

⁵² Leo XIII, *RN*, §31.

⁵³ Leo XIII, *RN*, §48.

⁵⁴ Leo XIII, *RN*, §50.

⁵⁵ Francis, *Laudato Si'. On Care for our Common Home* (Vatican, 2015), §157.

⁵⁶ Leo XIII, *RN*, §51.

⁵⁷ Again this can be seen as a key strand in later CST in John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* (Vatican, 1963).

⁵⁸ Leo XIII, *RN*, §57.

The significance of plural perspectives in *RN* can be seen not only in the intellectual but in the concrete work of the period, as Michael Schäfers has argued, looking specifically at the German context. He suggests that ‘central elements in [RN’s] content were developed through the Christian social movements or in them’⁵⁹. That assessment includes key lay Catholic thinkers, the role of distinctly Catholic politics, and the social movements themselves represent important influences on *RN*. This includes social theorists like Adam H. Müller, and Franz von Baader, though Schäfers notes that the dominant message from these thinkers was the emphasis on ‘the re-Christianizing of society’⁶⁰. The inclusion in *RN* of the State as a proper political entity engaged in such questions seems to disrupt that emphasis for Schäfers, and he links this with the views of Franz Joseph Buss, advocating for ‘state support of the system of distribution’⁶¹ – eventually weakly supported by the Catholic Centre Party.

The position that *RN* eventually came to, both anti-socialist and anti-liberal, Schäfers attributes to those Christian-social associations that had developed through the 1860s but which were truncated by the *Kulturkampf*. The Church attitude to such workers associations is evidently ambivalent through the nineteenth century, as Schäfers charts a shift in leaders such as W. E. von Ketteler, who became Bishop of Mainz, from a more paternalistic emphasis on pastoral giving to a model of active social involvement from state, workers and the Church. Outside Schäfers’s focus on nineteenth century Germany, the inevitable British example is George Henry Manning, who was a correspondent of Ketteler, and as Cardinal, very unusually ‘publically identified as a labor activist’⁶². Manning had argued directly for limits of the right to property in the face of inequality and therefore for redistribution,⁶³ and for workers’ rights to associate, famously mediating the London Dockers’ Strike of 1889.

Schäfers’s ultimate argument is that it was Christian social movements that had the most significant influence on *RN*:

because of their special position: they had come into being as a response to the pluralization of the modern world in the nineteenth century, took a direct part in the

⁵⁹ M. Schäfers, ‘Rerum Novarum – the Result of Christian Social Movements “From Below”’, tr. J. Bowden, *Concilium. Rerum Novarum: One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching*, edited by J. Coleman, G. Baum, 1991/5, pp. 3-17.

⁶⁰ M. Schäfers, ‘Rerum Novarum – “From Below”’, p. 6.

⁶¹ M. Schäfers, ‘Rerum Novarum – “From Below”’, p. 6.

⁶² J. Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p.49. Corrin that suggests this was during Manning’s leadership of an agricultural meeting at Exeter Hall in December 1872.

⁶³ J. Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals*, p. 51. Corrin refers both to the 1874 lecture to the Leeds Mechanics’ Institute which would be published as *The Rights and Dignity of Labour*, and an 1887 article in the *American Quarterly Review*.

social and political struggles and movements of the time, and in so doing developed an ethic which could be adopted by the papal encyclical.⁶⁴

This suggestion has two implications for the reading of *RN* as a contribution to public theological reasoning. Firstly, the rich picture of civic life that *RN* commends represents also the arena of diverse voices that shaped itself. It draws from lay, clerical and collective voices who ‘maintained the link between Christian faith and political action and so had a positive influence on the “climate” for the discussion’⁶⁵. Speaking not only positively about such groups as an abstraction, *RN* has been formed by their reflections, which Schäfers frames as a kind of bottom up contribution from wider lay life. Secondly, what follows from this is the significance of the plural public for that formation of theological reasoning. As Schäfers has argued, those voices were themselves shaped by increasingly plurality, by confrontations with concrete situations of injustice, and were at times ‘in principle trans-confessional’⁶⁶ in what they sought to articulate.

Conclusion

Rerum Novarum is not only a public document by virtue of considering a continuing public concern of labour injustice. What it offers is a text that is profoundly situated in the concerns of ‘otherness’ that Salvatore suggests is the foundation of thinking about the public sphere itself. That otherness is not polarised in this text into an us-and-them mentality of Catholic vs other perspectives but rather offers a reimagining of the moral, political whole, as ultimately mutually responsible. This is a contribution at the ethical level, taking seriously the discernment of the common good, a shared vision of living well together. In this sense *RN* represents a reflective tradition, that is plurally shaped and available to plural action, but insists on the recognition of injustice as a moral summons to all people to mutual responsibility. The reply it offers is multi-layered, identifying particular political tasks of intervention, regulation, redistribution, but also depicting an increasing richness of civic life as a necessary, differentiated response. The common good is disrupted by injustice, and Catholics and all participants in the public realm alike are called to respond from where we each are.

Still, one must continue to insist on contextualising *RN* in the light of its exclusionary elements. This is a crucial critique that the plural public encounter with concrete injustices should prompt

⁶⁴ M. Schäfers, ‘*Rerum Novarum* – “From Below”’, p. 14.

⁶⁵ M. Schäfers, ‘*Rerum Novarum* – “From Below”’, p. 5.

⁶⁶ M. Schäfers, ‘*Rerum Novarum* – “From Below”’, p. 12.

from a tradition that is genuinely seeking to discern its path. It is also a reality, as Onora O'Neill has argued:

The image of radical conceptual isolation depends on an exaggerated picture of differing ways of thought as closed and complete. Ways of thought and life are often (perhaps always) neither. Their boundaries are ill defined; they are porous to and often receptive of elements from disparate ways of life and thought⁶⁷.

O'Neill's organic image here might imply a kind of natural occurrence, not requiring consideration. In fact she is addressing both the concrete reality of our entanglement and a deliberative response. The reality of our plural context obliges us to reject an 'idealized view of communities, ideologies and nations'⁶⁸ as somehow hermetically sealed – including that of *RN*. Moreover, 'the very multiplicity of modes of discourse that distinguishes modern circumstances of justice allows not only for disagreement, but also for debate'⁶⁹ and asks for self-critique and further discernment. Speaking on Christian theology specifically, Stackhouse puts it in this way, suggesting that theologically driven politics has operated in ways that:

we now know to have been imperialistic, colonialistic, and exploitative. But we judge these as false, unjust, and unethical because the same theology that prompted expansion in these ways bears within it universal principles that demand both a self-critical judgment when its best contributions are distorted and a wider willingness to learn from other publics⁷⁰.

Albeit in a limited way, I suggest that *RN* represents just such a move, as it arose from a discerning tradition, engaged with concrete experiences of social life in the questions of labour injustice, and sought to develop its ethical vision of the common good further, in the light of plural civic action and reflection. At that ethical level the task of discernment is certainly not finished, and no more is the concrete demand for justice in labour. *RN* calls us to both, in fulfilment of that social bond that shapes the public sphere itself, as the truth and task of choosing to live together.

⁶⁷ O. O'Neill, *Justice Across Boundaries. Whose Obligations?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 92.

⁶⁸ O. O'Neill, *Justice Across Boundaries*, p. 92.

⁶⁹ O. O'Neill, *Justice Across Boundaries*, p. 98.

⁷⁰ M. L. Stackhouse, 'Public Theology and Ethical Judgment', *Theology Today* 54.2 (1997), pp. 165–179. p. 178.